

The Briefing



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“Jesus did not die on cross, says scholar”?

[Lionel Windsor \(http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/lionel-windsor/\)](http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/lionel-windsor/) | 12 September, 2011

This headline, or something like it, appeared around the globe on news sites last year (e.g. [The Telegraph \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/7849852/Jesus-did-not-die-on-cross-says-scholar.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/7849852/Jesus-did-not-die-on-cross-says-scholar.html), [CNN's religion blog \(http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/01/bible-doesnt-say-jesus-was-crucified-scholar-claims/\)](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/01/bible-doesnt-say-jesus-was-crucified-scholar-claims/), and [others \(http://www.exegetics.org/\)](http://www.exegetics.org/)). The story was also picked up (and embellished) by various blogs. Before you check out the links, let me ask you: What's your gut reaction when you read a headline like that? Are you annoyed or disgusted that yet another ivory-tower scholar is denying the fundamental truths of the Christian faith? Are you in despair at the relentless attacks of the media on the church? Or maybe you're pleased that the truth of science and reason is yet again prevailing over the religious dogmas of the past two millenia?

What if I told you that the scholar in question was simply reading his Bible in its context? Moreover, what if I told you that his scholarly findings are actually quite helpful for Christian faith?

A short while ago I attended a short presentation by this scholar, Gunnar Samuelsson, in which he explained his method and his conclusions. His question was simple: What do we actually know about Jesus' death from the ancient historical sources (especially the New Testament Gospels)? Our own modern image of Jesus' death is full of little details that we've absorbed from movies, statues, architecture, crucifixes, pictures, preachers' illustrations, etc. In particular, we have an image of Jesus' arms nailed to a horizontal plank of wood attached to a vertical pole. Samuelsson wanted to work out if this image can be substantiated from the Gospels themselves, in the light of other ancient sources. The Gospels talk about Jesus being put on a 'cross' and 'crucified' — but what do the original words mean? Samuelsson concluded that the words don't imply that Jesus was nailed to something cross-shaped (or T-

shaped). The original word ‘crucified’ simply means ‘stuck on a stick’. So all we know from these sources is that Jesus was nailed to a stick in order to die. Maybe the stick had a cross-beam. Maybe it didn’t.

This doesn’t deny any of the tenets of the Christian faith. [Samuelsson himself \(http://www.exegetics.org/\)](http://www.exegetics.org/) believes “that Jesus was the son of God who was crucified for our sins, that he was raised from the dead after three days, that he is with God on this very day and will return in glory to judge the living and dead.” He just wants to point out what the Bible says, and what it doesn’t say, about the details.

Why is this all quite helpful for Christian faith?

Firstly, it highlights the fact that the Bible is remarkably silent is about the physical details of Jesus’ suffering. It reminds us that biblical spirituality is very different from a spirituality based on physical objects (e.g. crucifixes), images or movies (e.g. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (<http://www.thepassionofchrist.com/>)). The Bible focuses on Jesus’ kingship, his relationship with the Father, his love for his disciples, the mocking, the shame, the abandonment etc. If we want our own spirituality to be biblical, we should focus on the same things.

Secondly, it also shows us that we can’t base our acceptance or rejection of Christianity (or of Christian scholars, for that matter) on media headlines. Headlines are designed to be sensational. In fact, the headline I quoted is effectively a lie designed to get people reading a relatively low-key story. The scholar did *not* say that Jesus didn’t die on a cross. He just said that we can’t be sure of the shape of the so-called ‘cross’ from the biblical accounts. But the headline, “Jesus maybe died on vertical pole, says scholar” doesn’t have the same zing. You need to read the sources, not the headlines. If you haven’t read the story of Jesus’ death recently, why not [check it out now \(http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark%2014:1-16:8&version=NIV\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark%2014:1-16:8&version=NIV)?

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